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FM AMEMBASSY VILNIUS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2420

INFO RUCNOSC/ORG FOR SECTY COOP IN EUR COLLECTIVE 001

UNCLAS VILNIUS 000472

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM OSCE PREL KDEM LH

SUBJECT: EMBASSY VILNIUS: INPUT FOR OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

REF: STATE 60838

¶1. Summary: Anti-Semitism and general intolerance are areas of concern in Lithuania. There are three specific issues that could warrant an expression of concern at the HDIM meetings: (1) lack of consistent condemnation by GOL officials of intolerant acts; (2) lack of protection of an old Jewish cemetery in Vilnius; and (3) continued delays in the effort to restitute Jewish communal property. End summary.

¶2. GOL officials should speak out strongly and immediately when acts of anti-Semitism or intolerance occur. This responsibility is explicitly noted in the OSCE's Berlin Declaration. It has not been met on numerous occasions in ¶2008. The most prominent event was a march of skinheads on March 11, Lithuania's independence day, that was anti-Semitic and anti-Russian (Note: Ethnic Russians make up 5.1 percent of the local population). Government officials did not condemn the march until a week had passed, a week that included numerous media stories about the event and numerous opportunities for leaders to express their concerns. In several other incidents involving displays of swastikas and other anti-Semitic or racist materials, the GOL made no statements of condemnation.

¶3. The GOL should take steps to grant comprehensive cultural heritage protection to the old Jewish cemetery in the Snipiskes neighborhood of Vilnius. The cemetery was encroached upon during the Russian imperialist occupation in the 19th century and desecrated during the Soviet occupation.

The combination of the murder of over 90 percent of Lithuania's Jews during WWII and fifty years of atheistic policies under the Soviets resulted in the removal of all visible vestiges of the cemetery. However, Jews around the world consider the cemetery an extremely sacred site and are outraged that it remains threatened by development. If the GOL took concrete steps to provide comprehensive protection to the site, this would promote and protect Lithuania's diverse history and would send a clear message of tolerance and respect for human rights, including respect for the dead and respect for religious freedom.

¶4. The GOL has for several years promised to provide for the return of or compensation for communal Jewish property, which was taken by the Nazi and Soviet occupying regimes. Jews made up over ten percent of the pre-war population in Lithuania, including a higher percentage in major cities. Only the tiniest fraction of Jewish property has been restituted, despite extensive privatization of property since independence in 1990. Many of Lithuania's OSCE and EU neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe have taken steps to restore Jewish communal property. If the GOL fulfilled this promise, it would warrant praise at the HDIM meetings.

CLOUD